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ABSTRACT

In 1996, Maryland's Carroll Community College (CCC) participated in the American Association of Community Colleges' Exploring America's Communities, which works to strengthen the teaching and learning of American history, literature, and culture at U.S. community colleges. As part of its Action Plan, CCC set out to upgrade its American Studies Concentration, which was not previously popular among students. The proposal was to make the concentration more attractive to students and to have the faculty of the concentration unify goals and share material. The faculty met for several months and developed a list of themes they felt best identified with the American spirit. They also agreed to revise their syllabi to make the themes more prominent. At the same time, a new interdisciplinary course involving the exploration of the American identity was developed. The final part of the proposal was the establishment of programs that would encourage faculty who teach required reading, writing, literature and speech classes to look at American pluralism and identity with their students. A recruiting campaign and an opportunity to strengthen ties among faculty arose when team members decided to schedule American Studies students together in time-blocked courses. Brochures and visits to local high schools have also been used for recruitment. Student feedback about the improvements has been positive. (HAA)

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Exploring America's Communities
Progress Report

In: National Conference on American Pluralism and Identity Program Book
(New Orleans, LA, January 18-19, 1997)

JC 970 094

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Carroll Community College

Carroll Community College is a comprehensive institution with credit and non-credit courses in transfer, career, and technical programs. Although the college has been in existence since 1976, it did not become a degree-granting institution until 1993. Until then, it operated as a campus of Catonsville Community College, which is part of the Baltimore County system. The college is located in Westminster, the county seat of Carroll County, an area of family farms and small communities northwest of Baltimore that is gradually becoming suburban. Our students are primarily from white, middle class families, though our minority population does reflect the demographics of the county itself. The student body consists of approximately 2500 credit students and 6000 non-credit students. In 1995, 46% of the county population enrolled in institutions of higher learning were attending Carroll Community College. The college is also a community center. Carroll Countians use the art gallery space, athletic fields, and conference facilities.In addition, the community patronizes college events such as concerts, films, and poetry readings.

The Action Plan of the Carroll team has several components. We wanted to upgrade the American Studies Concentration that has been listed in our catalog for several years, but has not been the choice of many students. Our proposal was to make the concentration more attractive to students and to find ways for faculty members who teach the courses making up the concentration to unify goals and share approaches to the material. The Action Plan that we put together in Washington last spring called for all faculty members involved in American Studies to identify common themes taught in all the courses and

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to articulate new goals and objectives for the program. The plan also included creating a new, interdisciplinary course as part of the American Studies curriculum and planning for faculty development programs dealing with American pluralism and identity.

The team of faculty members who teach the courses in the American Studies program (American government, American literature, U.S. History, and sociology) began meeting in late spring. By August we had identified a list of themes that we felt best identified the American spirit and that we all either currently dealt with in our courses or could include without changing our basic approaches to our subject matter. These themes are The American dream/destiny, individualism, regionalism and rootedness, the migration experience, egalitarianism, the Puritan ethic, and pluralism. We all agreed to rewrite our syllabi to make the themes more recognizable and prominent. This will enable students enrolling in American Studies to instantly see the ties between the courses. We also began planning for a spring speakers series, hopefully funded by a grant from the Maryland Humanities Council, to publicize the American Studies concentration to prospective students and to provide faculty development opportunities. The speakers will be asked to deal with the themes we have identified as the core of our program.

During this same time period, the two faculty members who will team teach the new interdisciplinary course were working to put it together. The course is entitled "A Sense of Place: Exploring Our American Identity," with a humanities designation. It includes literature, history, and geography and applies the themes identified above to six regions: New England, the South, the Industrial Heartland, the Great Plains, the Southwest, and the West. The course looks at the effects of history and geography on the literature of each area and the contributions of each region to American pluralism and identity.

A final part of our plan was to set up future faculty development programs for faculty members who teach required reading, writing, literature, and speech classes, to encourage them to look at American pluralism and identity with their students. We could see benefits in this approach for American

Studies students, because even more of their courses would be tied together, and for the entire student body as well.

When our mentor, Dr. Jo Marshall, visited our campus in October, all of the pieces of our plan came together in a way we hadn't anticipated. As we spoke with her, the idea of creating a community of learners, which had been discussed briefly in earlier sessions, became our central theme. Before the day was out, we had decided to work toward scheduling American Studies students together in time-blocked core courses. Suddenly we had a built-in recruiting campaign and the opportunity for strongly forged ties among the faculty members who would be part of this learning community. The conversations about the American identity they had been creating since the beginning of the planning process would continue indefinitely once students became part of it.

When Dr. Marshall and the team met with instructors of required reading, writing, literature, and speech classes to introduce them to their role in our future plans, the enthusiasm that many of them expressed about the project gave us another idea. Why not include them in the new learning community we were creating right away rather than waiting until after we had set up our future faculty development project? The administrators meeting with us during the day were enthusiastic about the ideas that were being generated at a fast pace, and gave us the go-ahead to put the program into effect for next fall.

Since October, we have put together a two-year course of study for American Studies students that groups their required humanities courses, both for the concentration and for general college requirements, in time blocks. The courses for fall, 1997, are already in place in the schedule. They include Sociology 101, English 101, and Humanities 111, A Sense of Place: Exploring Our American Identity. These courses will meet on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from 8:00-11:00 a.m. The faculty members who will be teaching the courses will be sharing texts, assignments, and field trips. (For example, the papers written in English 101 will be on topics generated in the other two classes. One book of readings used in Humanities 111 will also be a text in English 101. The entire group can take trips to any one of a large number of regional landmarks that are relevant in all three courses.) We are hoping to encourage

continuation of conversations begun during class time by having the entire group of students and instructors go to lunch together. Another learning group will form in the spring when three more faculty members--those teaching American Government, English 102, and Speech 101--become part of the project. American Studies students will take American literature and American history together in a similar time block in their second year.

We have created a brochure advertising our program which our recruiters are already taking with them as they visit local high schools. The recruiters feel that this program gives them an excellent opportunity to "sell" the college. In the spring, faculty members in the American Studies program will accompany recruiters as they travel around the county. We will also be sending out a series of publicity releases and are planning to meet with high school English and history teachers to enlist their support for the program. We are hoping that our speakers series, which will be open to the public, will generate a conversation between the college and the community about the nature of the American identity.

While we have not yet had the opportunity to engage in formal conversations with students about what it means to be an American, all of us have been talking about the program with students we now have in class and the response has been positive. In fact, some current students have decided to switch to the American Studies program that is now in the catalog. The responses of our colleagues have also been positive. All the college personnel we have had to work with to get the program in place have gone out of their way to accomodate us. We feel that we are hurtling along on a fast train right now, but the destination will be well worth the ride!